

Marine Corps Aviation: Transformation is more than aircraft. A look at Leadership

Subject Area Leadership

EWS 2006

Marine Corps Aviation: Transformation is more than
aircraft. A look at Leadership

Contemporary Issue Paper

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To

Major RA Martinez

07 February 2005

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE 07 FEB 2005		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2005 to 00-00-2005	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Marine Corps Aviation: Transformation is more than aircraft. A look at Leadership				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) United States Marine Corps,Command and Staff College, Marine Corps Combat Development Command,Marine Corps University, 2076 South Street,Quantico,VA,22134-5068				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 14	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

Developing junior aviators is a delicate and complex issue that is rarely discussed in Marine Corps Aviation ready rooms among senior aviators. It is a concept that is not a part of the development of the average fleet pilot. Development of junior aviators falls into two categories. The first category is the pilot that will advance ahead of his peers. He or she typically becomes the Weapons and Tactics Instructor (WTI) in the operations department or a Functional Check Pilot (FCP) in the maintenance department. The second category is the pilot that will fill other jobs around the squadron and receive the most basic of qualifications such as Helicopter Aircraft Commander (HAC) or section leader. It is the pilot that falls into the second category that will be the focus of this paper.

The average time for a rotary wing pilot to complete flight school is two and half years. This is the time to get through flight school to the fleet replacement squadron (FRS). For a CH-46E replacement aircrew (RAC), the average time to train at the FRS is three months. It takes, on average, a rotary pilot 28 months to reach a fleet squadron. After 28 months of flight training they are only

complete with the 100 level core competencies according to the T&R manual for this type/model/series (TMS).¹

Two things happen when a new pilot checks into the new squadron. The first is that they are given a NATOPS and squadron tactical SOP. The second is that within the week they are assigned an administrative job within the squadron. This is the first time that the pilots are separated into one of the two categories. Junior aviators do not automatically receive qualifications. They must earn them. Pilots assigned to either the operations department or maintenance department enter highly visible jobs by the nature of the department they are assigned. Because of the specific administrative skills required in these jobs, pilots assigned to these departments are often kept for their resident knowledge.

If the pilots fall into the second category they are assigned to one of the support shops. It is the authors experience that pilots assigned to a department other than the operations or maintenance department, have a more difficult time moving into the operations or maintenance department after an 18 month tour in a support shop such as the S-1, DOSS or S-4. It is not unknown for a pilot to make that transition though.

¹ CH-46E T&R Manual, pg 1-2

The T&R manual establishes "training events based on specific requirements and performance standards to ensure that trained aircrews remain ready, relevant, and fully capable of supporting the MAGTF Commander."² According to T/O 8940 for the HMM, the responsibility for the training of a new pilot lies with the operations department. The manual establishes core competencies from the 100 to the 600 competency level. Each level represents progression not only for the new pilot, but for the developing flight leaders as well.

Assigned to either category, the new pilot has to divide his time between continuing the development as a pilot and gaining proficiency in the administrative job. For the new pilot to complete the initial Core Skill Proficiency (CSP) the pilot must complete the 200 and 300 level flights. To do this they must complete a total of 48 flights to obtain initial combat ready designation. Also during this period of approximately 18 months the new pilot is also studying for their HAC designation that include extra flights and classes.

Jobs in the first category, for the most part, do not require the pilot to be absent from the squadron for additional training. There is a requirement for on the job

² CH-46 E T&R Manual, pg 1-3.

training that does occupy some time. Often jobs in the second category may take the pilot out of the squadron for days or sometimes weeks at a time.

There are a few different examples. The first is the embarkation officer in the S-4 department. The class is located at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina and is approximately six weeks long. The adjutant is often, also the legal officer. This class is usually located locally but removes the pilot for a week from the squadron. It is the same for the SACO officer in the S-5.

Classroom training and job responsibilities often keep the pilot out of the cockpit during important training periods. It was not unusual to have pilots kept off of a flight schedule because of ground job responsibilities, be it legal, administrative or training.

Pilots who fall into the first category, assigned to the maintenance department or the operations department, find that their jobs keep them close to the cockpit. This keeps them flying and training somewhat more consistently than counterparts in the second category. This puts them ahead in certain parts of the syllabus, such as night vision goggle (NVG) training, and tactical flights, that increase individual CRP and allow them to fly more of the advanced flights.

Squadron leadership is essential to developing good flight leadership in a squadron. A Marine Corps Gazette article, written by retired Colonel Barry Ford, stated that improved leadership in the aviation community would increase unit safety records, lower mishap records and improve information sharing in the squadron.³ Colonel Ford has stated that to create a safer environment in aviation, aviation organization must be improved. To take this one step further, to improve the junior officer corps, ensure future dependable, professional senior leadership and cement continuity of Marine Corps Values, aviation organization must improve.

MCDP-6 describes what makes good leadership. "...to create a close knit sense of team which is essential to developing trust and understanding..."⁴. The CO of the squadron needs to establish an environment in the ready room and in the departments that focuses first on the professional development as an aviator and then as a staff officer.

The current administrative organization highlights the dilemma in Marine aviation. An HMM is not organized by its tactical mission. It is organized by its administrative

³ "To Improve Aviation Safety, Improve Aviation Organization", Col Barry Ford USMC (Ret), Marine Corps Gazette, May 2005,

⁴ MCDP-6, pg 122

tasks to accomplish its tactical mission. This organization has far reaching effects for its officers starting at the most junior level.

It is not unheard of for a pilot to develop a permanent professional reputation during that first administrative job. It could be a reputation, deserved or undeserved, that may follow the pilot for the rest of his or her career. It will also play a part in determining future responsibilities and qualifications in the squadron.

The new pilot will have a department head. They may not have a mentor in that department head. That senior Captain or Major in charge of the department is often heavily tasked. Their responsibilities are not only for maintaining technical and tactical proficiency, but the administrative performance of their department. This includes monitoring assigned Marines, taskers from the headquarters element and various other assignments. Other than simple professional courtesy there is often no ownership in junior pilots assigned to their department. They are not held responsible for the professional development of the new pilot.

To discuss organization of the squadron two things must be discussed. The first is the difference between the squadron and an infantry battalion. By T/O they both

support a different number of people and equipment. Also by T/O they are equal in the structural hierarchy of the Marines Corps.

Besides actual numbers, the difference between them is that a battalion has MOS specific officers assigned to the Headquarters and Service (H&S) company. These officers accomplish the daily support works that allow the unit to function. They are also in position to assist the battalion and company commanders as necessary. As discussed earlier, the squadron depends on pilots cross trained to perform many functions.

With technology dominating the work place and the battlefield, continuing to rely on cross training to accomplish the mission is hazarding the unit and the Marines in the unit. In the battalion, it has an assigned communications officer in the S-6 that is current on the latest communications equipment. It has been the authors experience that in aviation unit, the most proficient pilot with computers has been typically assigned as the s-6. This puts aviation units at a distinct disadvantage. This just one example.

The second thing, and most critical issue, is the organization of the squadron on administrative lines. The reorganization of a squadron by its tactical organizations

would provide for improved command and control, improved pride in ownership and development of new pilots and most importantly, increased leadership opportunities in a community that traditionally does not many for its officers.

Time to train and development of the new pilot has been discussed already. The reorganization of the unit to provide for previously mentioned ideas is next. Squadrons operate tactically as sections, divisions and flights when in flying, whether in peace or combat. An infantry company is divided into squads and platoons at home or while deployed. Organization along tactical lines should be no different for a squadron.

"Leader-as-teacher is an essential component of our approach to leadership"⁵ Organizing into sections, divisions and flights gives pilots to opportunity to be first a student then a teacher. It requires senior officers to take ownership of something more than an administrative job, forcing them to be a teacher when it may not be easy or convenient. It provides for tactical continuity that a commanding officer can openly and easily use to asses his units combat readiness. Instead of relying on an operations department report to give an indication of a pilot's

⁵ MCDP-6, pg 123

progress, the CO now has senior leadership to develop and report on pilot's progress. It gives a qualitative perspective to the quantitative reports.

Colonel Ford offers the re-organization of the squadron along tactical lines vice administrative roles as a solution to the safety problem. He states that doing so would give section and flight leaders administrative authority as well as tactical authority and improve the squadron safety performance.⁶ It is possible a reorganization along tactical flights would also increase leadership development, combat readiness and unit cohesiveness.

Multiple benefits may result from the reorganization. First, the new pilots would be paired with a mid level HAC. The junior pilot would have an immediate mentor and a reference point of progress within the squadron. That junior HAC would have an opportunity to help develop that new pilot, develop the HAC's abilities as an instructor, pilot and mentor. The HAC would also be responsible for that junior pilots fitness report, exposing both to pride in ownership and development.

⁶ "To Improve Aviation Safety, Improve Aviation Organization", Colonel Barry Ford, USMC (Ret), Marine Corps Gazette, May 2005.

The second benefit would be for that mid level HAC. The pilot would be assigned to more senior captain section leader as a wingman. That section leader would get the same results as the mid level HAC, but developing more of the leadership skills as well as tactical proficiency and consistency. This organization would provide leadership and mentorship opportunities that are not available under the current administrative organization.

The third benefit is a little more large scale. The CO now has the opportunity to assign senior captains and junior field grade officers as division leaders. The CO would be taking advantage of having watched pilots operates as pilots first, in a tactical organization, and as administrators secondly. It would allow the CO to place pilots in senior leadership positions that would take advantage of strengths and weakness.

It would also increase the spread of qualifications throughout the squadron for pilots. Each division and flight would need FCP's, WTI's, NSI's. It would be hard for a CO to put all of his qualified pilots in flight or division. This would cause each pilot to develop to ensure that tactical integrity was maintained for each division or flight but for the squadron as well.

Flight leaders would be the squadrons senior field grade officers with appropriate hours and qualifications. Typically the Operations Officer, Executive officer and the Maintenance Officer along with the CO. Flight leaders would be responsible for ensure that their flights are receiving the necessary training and flight hours. This would not only include flying. It could be expanded to incorporate ground training, Safety, NATOPS and tactics in a class room environment. Each learning opportunity would also be an opportunity to train together. It would go a long way of removing an us versus them mentality that exists between junior and senior pilots. Junior pilots would be in a classroom environment learning from the experience of the senior pilots, while senior pilots would get a review of information they already know. It would also create cross talk and development of new ideas and policies.

A reorganization of the squadron has many possibilities and they do not just apply to the officers. It is an idea that could be easily spread among the enlisted personnel as well. It is an idea that would require taking a second look at unit T/O's/ It would require senior leadership to say that the system, while not broken, may be bent and most importantly requires professionals to take a professional look at the way the

Marines Corps aviation community operates and most importantly how Marine Corps aviation leadership has a great opportunity to inspire, develop and improve on a ready room of competent professionals.

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